

GLOSSOLALIA: EMOTIONALISM OR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING?

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I. INTRODUCTION

II. THE BIBLICAL BASIS

III. A HISTORICAL VIEW

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

V. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Christianity is facing many challenges today. Some have been around for a long time and many have been resurrected to new life after years of dormancy. Phenomena such as demon possession, mysticism, spiritism, and a revival of Eastern religions are again reaching into the church to cause unrest and dissent. But the one thing which has caused the greatest amount of unrest in recent days is the rapid rise of glossolalia or "speaking in tongues."

For many years, the vast majority of Christian church groups looked upon "speaking in tongues" as something relegated to a few fundamentalist groups called "pentecostal" or in derision, "holy rollers." It was not taken seriously but understood only as a lot of hollering and carrying-on as this writer's grandfather described it. Many felt it was a good source of entertainment -- but only if it was viewed from a safe distance. But in the last ten years we have seen a big change in this movement. Theologians, Hollywood stars, scholars and businessmen have spoken up as to their experience of "speaking in tongues." William Samarin (10, p.48) writes:

Today eight to fourteen million persons believe in glossolalia. The movement is no longer restricted to the Pentecostal church. Persons who have had the "experience," as

they call it, can be found in Congregational, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopal/Anglican, Methodist and Catholic congregations.

This movement is not something any Christian of today can simply dismiss. It is time for each of us to be willing to invest the time and effort to be informed. For this writer, the need was greatly seen in the number of young men and women affected by this movement in my last assignment in Europe. In counseling and working with these young people, both sides of the glossolalic coin have been seen.-- the harm it can do and the benefit it can bring.

For this reason, this paper will approach the problem from three basic directions. First, what is the Biblical basis for tongues? It is primarily a Christian phenomenon, so what does the Bible have to say about it. Secondly, to look at the movement through the historical viewpoint -- what has happened since New Testament days and what is happening today? And finally, what are the psychological factors involved in the movement, both from the individual and group dynamics view? It is hoped by this three-fold approach that the movement may be seen in its full light and be better understood.

II. THE BIBLICAL BASIS

There is no doubt as to the fact of glossolalia in the New Testament. The word itself is a combination of the two Greek words "glossa" - the tongue, and "lalein" - to talk. Literally the term denotes speaking with the tongue, which is nothing unusual. It later came to be translated "strange or obscure speech," which is what is commonly called glossolalia today.

There are three writers in the New Testament who specifically mention "speaking in tongues." The first reference is found in Mark 16: 17 and is the only reference to tongues in the four gospel accounts. The problem with using this as a "proof-text" involves a serious textual criticism of this particular passage. Dr. Frank Stagg (12, pp.23-24) says:

Textual critics are almost unanimous in the judgment that the authentic text of Mark ends at Chapter sixteen, verse eight. Either this was the original ending to the Gospel of Mark, or the original ending has been lost. The most reliable manuscripts in Greek, Latin, and Syriac are supported by the Armenian, Ethiopian, and Georgian versions and the early church fathers, like Clement of Alexandria (ca.200), Origen (ca.230), Eusebus (ca.340), and Jerome (d. 420), in concluding Mark at 16:8.

The verses nine through twenty ending are thought to be added by a later writer who reflects some of the second-century concerns of the church.

This leaves only two sources who deal with glossolalia in the New Testament. Luke, the author of Acts and Paul, in his advice to the church at Corinth in I Corinthians, chapters twelve through fourteen.

The primary passage in Acts is in Chapter two where Luke describes the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem. It was at this Feast that Jesus' followers received the gift of the Holy Spirit from God. Luke's account is clear enough. The majority of interpreters believe that Luke describes the tongues on the Day of Pentecost as understandable language. In Acts 2: 7-8 we read, "For these men are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking all the native languages of the lands where we were born." The miracle from God involved the speaking and understanding of the message presented on that day, in known languages.

There are only two other references in Acts to tongues, and these are only brief mentions. In both Acts 10: 44-46 and Acts 19: 4-6, Luke mentions tongues in reference to non-Jews receiving the gospel and in turn, receiving the Holy Spirit. The emphasis in both places is definitely upon the coming of the Holy Spirit -- with tongues secondary. It is difficult in these passages to determine whether Luke is talking about intelligible or unintelligible tongues, but based on the Acts 2 passage, it would point to intelligible speech.

The next place we find a discussion of glossolalia in the New Testament is in the letter from Paul to the church in Corinth. Paul mentions "speaking in tongues" in his letter because he saw it as a direct threat to this group of believers. The tongues which Paul talks about reveal a definite change from the tongues mentioned in Acts. Here we find Paul mentioning both "speaking in tongues" and what he calls the "interpretation of tongues."

In I Corinthians, chapter twelve, Paul speaks of the dangers to

the fellowship and witness of the Corinthian church because of the over-emphasis upon "speaking in tongues." In chapter thirteen, he lays down a better way in claiming love as the greatest gift, spiritually speaking, from God. And then in chapter fourteen, Paul writes: "But in public worship I would rather speak five words that people can understand and be helped by, than ten thousand words while 'speaking in tongues' in an unknown language."(v.19).

Paul's emphasis is that the gift can be very good and helpful to an individual's spiritual life, but it can produce confusion and misunderstanding when used in a public gathering. He adds a further suggestion that if it is done in public, it should be with no more than two or three people and only with one of them interpreting what is said. So he is saying, in effect, there is a lot more to the Christian life than "speaking in tongues."

III. A HISTORICAL VIEW

Paul's New Testament writings are the last major words we hear concerning tongues until the late seventeenth century. The years in between were truly lean years for the glossolalia movement. It was not until about 1685 that we see or hear of a revival beginning in the tongues movement. This new movement began in France with a peasant group who lived in the Cevennes Mountains and came to be called the Cevenols. The group lived under severe persecution from the French Catholic Church and also in severe conditions of poverty. Their experiences, which included "speaking in tongues," had a heavy emphasis upon their powers of prophetic inspiration. By 1710 their voice was heard less and less until the group completely died out.

The next voice was heard from England in the nineteenth century. The leader of this movement was a man named Edward Irving, a Scottish Presbyterian pastor. In 1831, under Irving's leadership, a tongues movement broke out in London. Despite his efforts to keep the movement localized, it did spread and Irving found himself in trouble with the church authorities as a result. In May of 1832, he was deposed and in 1833, defrocked and excommunicated from the Church of Scotland.

Both of these instances were in Europe and in America some voices were beginning to be heard. Many different and widespread revival movements broke out and many resulted in an experience of "speaking in tongues" for the participants. The Quakers, early Methodists, the Shakers, and the Mormons all have recorded instances of some of their members

cultivating the gift of glossolalia.

We see the movement beginning to get on it's feet after several Pentecostal revivals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first major recorded experience came out of Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas under the leadership of Charles F. Parham. A young woman named Agnes N. Ozman, a student at Bethel College, received the "baptism of the Spirit" on January 1, 1901 and claimed to speak several languages. From this beginning, Bethel students and converts of Parham began to spread the movement throughout Kansas. It went into Missouri and Texas in 1903 and then on to Los Angeles in 1906. By the end of 1906, the Pentecostal movement had spread to Chicago, New York, Canada, India, Norway, and Sweden. E. Glenn Hinson (12, p.69) notes The Pentecostal Movement by Nils Bloch-Hoell as stating that by 1955 thirty-six Pentecostal bodies reported a combined membership of around one and a half million people in the United States alone.

Up until the 1960's, glossolalia was confined primarily to the Pentecostal churches in the United States. Since that time we have seen it break into the "higher" churches. It was in April of 1960, according to Mills (7, p.11), that Dennis Bennett, pastor of an Episcopal church in Van Nuys, California revealed to his church that he had the gift of glossolalia. In 1964, the group called the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International claimed that ten to fifteen per cent of all Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Baptists had experienced "speaking in tongues." Glossolalia-type meetings were held in the mid-sixties at Stanford University, Princeton Theological Seminary and Yale University.

So this new or "neo-pentecostal" movement does not have any denominational bounds. It has made it's impact upon every major Protestant denomination and also on the Roman Catholic Church. Robert Voigt (14, p. 10) states that the Catholic Pentecostal movement started in 1967 at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh. The number estimated today in the United States is between twenty and thirty thousand Catholics.

Many of the modern day Pentecostal groups have not only the emphasis upon "speaking in tongues" but also upon "interpreting." A representative from the United Pentecostal Church stated that they felt both gifts were of the same degree. That is, one was just as important as the other. Yet he did say that the size of the group was never limited when the gifts were exercised.

The movement today has gained a lot of support from "higher" church groups, "old-line" churches, movie stars, and public figures. The Jesus Movement and it's emphasis upon glossolalia has given the movement headlines in many magazines and newspapers. So the movement as it stands today affects a large number of people of all kinds.

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

What is it that draws a person to the glossolalia movement? In talking with people about glossolalia who were not in the movement, one thing seemed to be common. Most of them felt that a certain personality type tended to get involved with the tongues movement. The surprising aspect about the research on the glossolalia movement by psychologists shows this to be a false assumption. Dr. J.P. Kildahl (6, p.48) states: "On any broad criteria of emotional well-being, the tongue-speakers and non-speakers were about the same. Tongue-speakers are not of any special personality type."

Individual research did reveal some common characteristics among those who practiced glossolalia. Of those interviewed by this writer, not one person was found who did not have a "special" relationship to the individual introducing them to tongues. In many of the cases, they had almost a worship-like reverence toward the person. One young man, in Germany, called his friend in the United States on the average of once each week. Another spent every free hour with his "spiritual leader" as he called him. Other surveys indicate this same kind of dependence within the groups upon their leaders and "introducers" to tongues.

Another common characteristic among glossolalists was that the majority had gone through some crisis in their life just prior to their first experience with glossolalia. Some of the crises had to do with marital problems, financial troubles, serious illness, recent deaths in the family, or problems in their religious life. One couple interviewed

had been having serious marital problems which counseling had not resolved. They were taken by another couple to a meeting where both spoke in tongues that same night. Their marital difficulties disappeared, they said, and they became totally involved with the movement. It would seem that some kind of anxiety crisis always precedes the person receiving the experience of "speaking in tongues."

Other studies also revealed that the level of involvement of the person seemed to be determined by his or her emotional stability. Those who were emotionally immature were the ones who claimed the most for glossolalia. It had become a kind of magical cure-all for everything they faced in their lives.

Those who spoke in tongues agreed that they had no control over what they said. Several said they had tried to stop while speaking in tongues and were unable. One young man said that he was conscious of speaking in an unknown tongue but had no knowledge of what he was saying nor control over it.

An interesting characteristic of the movement is the close-knit nature of the group. The group always banded together in a close mutually-supportive relationship. The feeling seemed to be that those who did not speak in tongues were definately "outsiders" and more than often resented by the group because of their lack of acceptance for tongues. This is probably the reason most groups who start to speak in tongues within a larger group, eventually break off from the non-tongues portion.

In the services or sessions visited where glossolalia was practiced, there always was a dramatic type of experience incorporated

within the service. The whole service seemed to be geared at a very high emotional pace, so it is understandable why dramatic emotional displays often occur. The meetings were from two to four hours in length and the intensity of the service dictated the response of the people participating. At no time was there any clear-cut message in tongues/interpretation type of situation.

V. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

It is difficult for this writer to accept the modern day movement of glossolalia for the same reasons listed by Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth. As with the Corinthians, one sees a pre-occupation and over-emphasis upon the gift of "speaking in tongues." There is no real way of getting around Paul's basic emphasis in I Corinthians 14:4 when he says everything they do should "...help the entire church grow in holiness and happiness."

The public displays of glossolalia can only lead to more evidence of emotionalism and dramatic displays. This writer's experience in the past three years of research and study cause him to agree with Dr. J.P. Kildahl's (6, p.74) conclusion:

Tongue-speaking does not look very uniquely spiritual to me after many experiences of watching people teach other people how to speak in tongues. I have observed the same routine everywhere I have been: (1) a meeting devoted to intense concentration on tongue-speaking, followed by (2) an atmosphere of heightened suggestibility to the words of the tongue-speaking leader, after which (3) the initiate is able to make the sounds he is instructed to make.

Where is the movement going from today? It is hard to predict, but it would seem that more division will come before the movement settles down once again. This is the unfortunate thing about the movement. The gift of tongues has the potential of bringing a person closer to God in a spiritual experience. But when it becomes the all-consuming passion of a person, he or she is likely to miss the beautiful experience of a balanced faith and commitment to God.

Dr. Wayne Oates (12, p. 99) sums it up very well when he says:

...a thoroughgoing reaffirmation of the total doctrine of the Holy Spirit and it's function in the life of the church is the best antidote for the problem, needs, and creativity presented by glossolalics within the life of the church.

The church today must remain open and be very careful to keep in touch with the needs of the people of God. Many people are searching for answers and finding something in the experiences of glossolalia. The task of the church is to lead them on to the full and abundant life which Christ promises to all.

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